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Constructing Civil Society in Myanmar:

Struggles for Local Change and Global Recognition



Constructing Civil Society in Myanmar:
Struggles for Local Change and Global Recognition

Maaïke Matelski

This PhD thesis describes how people in and from Myanmar (formerly Burma) organised under the banner of civil society during an unprecedented political transition period from military to civilian rule (2010-2015). For nearly five decades, the country was characterised by conflict, repression of dissent, and severe human rights violations, making organisation in any shape or form a hazardous undertaking. Up to recently, foreign researchers, donors and activists therefore followed the assertion of vocal political activists that no independent civil society existed inside the country, and most assistance to Burmese civil society was channelled to activists in exile.

Yet as this research demonstrates, people inside the country continued to organise in various ways in order to bring about social and political change. Many of these actors took a more pragmatic stance, arguing for gradual rather than revolutionary change. The occurrence of ethnic ceasefires in the 1990s, cyclone Nargis in 2008, and elections in 2010 strengthened their position, as each resulted in increased international attention for domestic civil society organisations. As diverging visions on socio-political change were increasingly contested in transnational platforms, civil society actors selectively framed their positions towards an international audience in order to ensure foreign support. The increase in donor assistance, moreover, strengthened the role of powerful civil society actors in Myanmar, who increasingly acted as intermediaries between the population and the international community. This thesis analyses how civil society actors have reacted to the political transition process that started in 2010, and who ultimately benefited from the rapid changes that took place in the five years that followed.

Maaïke Matelski studied Social Psychology and International Development at the University of Amsterdam (2005), and Human Rights at the London School of Economics and Political Science (2007). She worked for various civil society organisations before starting her PhD in Anthropology at the Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam. Between 2010 and 2015, she conducted participant observation and interviewed Burmese civil society actors in Thailand and Myanmar.

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